

CHILDREN'S BOOKS IN ENGLISH AVAILABLE IN BANGALORE

—A CRITICAL SURVEY

—C.B. MUTHAMMA

The English language bookshops of Bangalore tend to be concentrated along the well known Mahatma Gandhi Road. These shops have been frequented by me for several years now, in an effort to find books for my nephew who lives in Bangalore and is now ten years old. The search started as soon as he was able to look at picture books, and thereafter, to the pre-reading stage, when he could have stories read to him while he followed ^{each} story with the accompanying pictures. At this second stage, the biggest standby was comics, mainly *Amar Chitra Katha*, which were usually sold by newsagents rather than the bookshops. The news agents also carry children's magazines like *Tinkle* and serials like *Phantom*.

Easily the largest of the Bangalore shops is Gangarams. It has a fairly sizeable section for children's books, both foreign and Indian publications. The books are well laid out and the titles can be easily scanned for selection. Most of my purchases in Bangalore have been from this shop. The next largest is the Premier Book Shop, and though it has an interesting collection for young and old, it has greatly outgrown its accommodation, and titles are not readily legible because books are just piled on top of each other, literally up to the ceiling! One has to ask for this or that book or author and the helpful staff dig it out of the pile. Recently I bought *Born Free* by Joy Adamson from there, not having seen it in any of the other shops. Higginbothams, which is an old and well-known firm of booksellers in the South, especially Madras, is now (in Bangalore) a shadow

of its former self. There is a small section of children's books but it is a cursory selection and includes such items as small, glossy hardcovers of classical English fairytales and other stories as rendered by American cartoons on videos, which are not a good substitute for the originals.

In addition to these three shops, there are, not far away, the Christian Literature Society bookshop and Motilal Banarsidas, the Indological Publishers and Distributors, side by side, with a common main street door. Each has a predictable range. The C.L.S. carries literature connected with Christianity and Motilal Banarsidas carries literature on India, covering a wide range of subjects including the classics which are ordinarily considered Hindu literature. The books cater mainly to adult and academic readers, but there is a small section for children, consisting mainly of selected publications from *Amar Chitra Katha* in a glossy edition, covering not only the epics and other classics but also personalities from Indian history.

One other book shop in the area is L.B. Publishers and Distributors Ltd. Though it is an interesting shop, on the whole, it is not of great interest from the point of view of children's books. However, I did get a set of the Oxford Encyclopaedia for Children from that shop.

One other source of books for children in Bangalore is the Ramakrishna Mission. As might be expected, it publishes books on the epics and myths and legends. The main branch of the Mission is located somewhat away from the city centre, in

Basavangudi, an area where public transport is not easily available; however it does have one or two branches which are more accessible. The NCERT has some outlets for textbooks in outlying, usually congested, areas, which obviously cater mainly to the areas in which they are located. Their publications are not available in any of the main English language bookshops.

In looking for books in English for Indian children, one has the following criteria in mind: 1) The book should be written in easy, but correct and idiomatic English. 2) The print should be reasonably large and there should be illustrations. 3) The general quality of paper and printing should be good. 4) The subject matter should be such as to help to form the child's mind in a constructive way. 5) It should hold the child's interest. 6) It should help the child to grow up with an understanding of India, the Indian scene and heritage, rather than growing up to see India through foreign eyes.

In buying books for my nephew I have relied heavily on a source outside Bangalore, namely, the Children's Book Trust in Delhi. The C.B.T. books usually meet all the above criteria. What is more, they have been eagerly received by my nephew. But in Bangalore I have seen only a very small selection of C.B.T. books at the C.L.S. Book Shop. They were not to be found anywhere else, though the Premier Book Shop did say that they stocked C.B.T. books. It seems to me that there is scope for a much wider sale of C.B.T. books in the main shops. Digressing a little, I could add that with the new language policy in schools (compulsory teaching in the mother-tongue in the primary classes) the scope for getting Karnataka government acceptance of Kannada translations of C.B.T. books would improve. Clearly, the availability of good books in Kannada for children is likely to be a major problem.

In addition to the C.B.T. shop in Delhi, I have been able to get many beautifully produced books

on science and general knowledge published by foreign firms like Hamlyn (a well known British Company) also in Delhi. They do not seem to be available in Bangalore. I recall, particularly, an excellent book on space — a book on popular astronomy which would be equally good for children or grown-ups, which was promptly lapped up by my nephew. He was about eight years old at the time.

In Bangalore itself, my principle source of books has been Gangarams. They carry a reasonable variety of foreign publications — well known children's classics like Enid Blytons or *Tintin*, but they are rather expensive. One thin number of *Tintin* costs Rs. 100. Other Western classics like *Gulliver's Travels* or *Moby Dick* were available in foreign paperbacks, with a small print, and no illustrations, apparently in an effort to bring down the price. I frequently saw such paperbacks in a series called the *Watermill Classics* (e.g. *Time Machine*) printed by the Watermill Press in New Jersey, USA. It seems a great pity that this type of book should be in small print, without illustrations. But it was at Gangaram's that I found a large, beautifully printed and illustrated children's *Holy Bible* published by the Colour Library Book Ltd. in Surrey, U.K. I cannot recall the price; what I do recall is that my nephew went through it at one sitting. It was there, too, that I found small handbooks of an internationally published series, called *The Young Discovery Library*, obviously meant for children, beautifully printed and illustrated. These contained scientific and general information. One was on the making of salt, and another, if I remember correctly, on the history of paper. The books were interestingly written, with the coloured illustrations predominating, and would have easily held any child's attention. Not all these books were available all the time. One had to keep visiting the shop in the hope of finding something of interest. Classics like fairytales from Grimm or Andersen were not always avail-

able. In actual fact I had picked these up from a Delhi bookshop.

The Indian publications were of uneven quality, whether in their language or style of production. Some Indian publishers have tried to bring the stories of religious leaders like the Buddha or Prophet Mohammed, or Guru Nanak, or Baha'ullah to the Indian readers, in volumes designed apparently for children, but their English and the narrative leave much room for improvement. In this context, I should perhaps also mention Indian paperbacks of abbreviated English and American Classics published by an Indian firm in pocket edition which I found in some of the Delhi bookshops. These were of extremely poor quality, especially the language and narrative. Having bought a few and glanced through them, I had no option but to treat the books as waste paper.

In recent years I have become aware of some Indian writers for children in English. One of them, obviously a foreigner married to an Indian, seems to find it difficult to write about friendships of ten or eleven-year-olds without romantic overtones. Another Indian, a well known historian, has put out small volumes of traditional tales, writing in a style that is more appropriate for a doctoral thesis. One point of light among Indian writers for children is Ruskin Bond, especially when he writes original stories rather than retelling tradi-

tional stories. The scenes are authentic, the characters real, and the stories themselves full of interest.

Some gaps were felt rather keenly. There is no good history of India for children. The Information and Broadcasting Ministry put out a book in the sixties, which is no longer available. It needs to be expanded, illustrated and updated—updated not necessarily chronologically, but in terms of current standards of publication for children, if their interest is to be held by material which has to be an essential part of their reading and education. There is also a need for a general book on India for children, something on the lines of Minoos Masani's *Our India* published several decades ago. But the new version has to cover a wider field, with the addition of good illustrations. We also need good scientific books on India—on our flora and fauna, our past and current history in the various sciences. The C.B.T. has an attractive little booklet about the story of zero, but we need a wider coverage of subjects.

The beautiful books for children that occasionally come from abroad make us realise what a handicap the Indian child faces, both in respect of material that helps him to conserve his identity and self-respect, and in respect of preparing him for life in a competitive world.

Reading expands imagination.

-Tormod Haugen